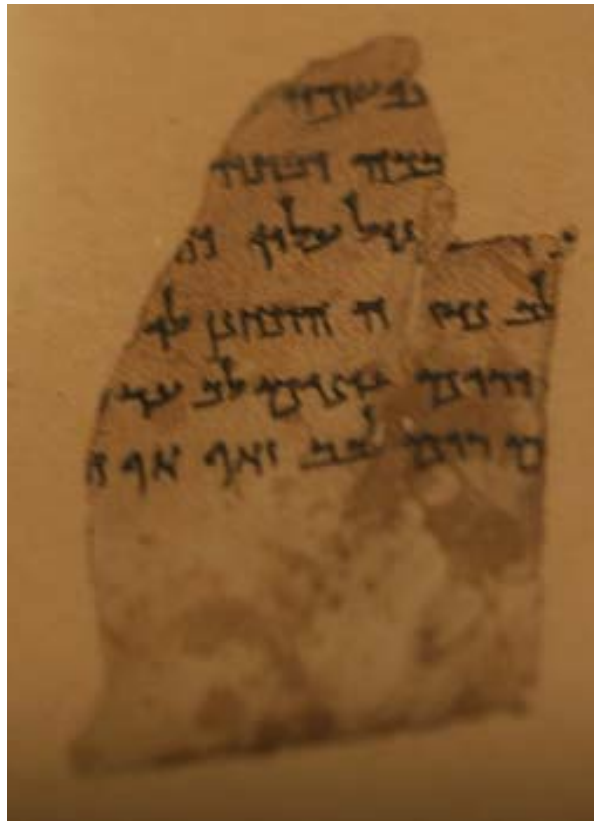


*The Covenant Pulpit*



# EXODUS

*Possessing the Promises*

“A BURNING BUSH, OLD STICK & SHAKING HAND”

EXODUS 2&3

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**A riddle:** What's the value of a seven-inch bar of steel?

**The answer:** It all depends.

Take that steel and ball it into sinkers as weights for a fishing line and it is worth about twenty-five dollars. Make of it fishing hooks and it's now valued at \$250. Turn it into blades for pocket knives and it jumps to \$2500. But, if you craft that seven-inch bar of steel into intricate springs for a fine Swiss watch, it's now worth a whopping \$250,000! The value of that seven-inch steel depends on two things: in whose hands it rests and for what purpose it's being shaped.

**A second riddle:** What's the value of a person?

**The same answer:** It all depends.

Like that steel bar, our value depends on who holds us and for what purpose we are being shaped.

Take Moses. The Pharaoh brought this Jewish slave baby into his palace and forged him into grade "A" Egyptian steel. At age 40, this adopted *Prince of Egypt* is finely-honed, sharpened to a razor' edge, and polished to perfection—a sword of war, resting in the hand of the king who shaped him to expand an empire.

But Moses is a sword that cuts both ways. He tries to spark a slave rebellion, but his mettle cracks under the stress and shatters. He ends up a fugitive on the run, hiding out in the most desolate badlands on planet earth. He, who dined with kings, sleeps under desert stars with ragged nomads. The commander of men becomes a herder of sheep. And the passing years turn a prince's swagger into an old man's limp.

How often does he cry out in despair? When his prayers echo off canyon walls and reverberate back unanswered, does he feel mocked by God? In a moment of suicidal despair, Martin Luther bitterly complained, "I feel like a solitary bird warbling his little song against the wind, but no one hears." Moses surely feels like Martin Luther.

The day comes when he resigns himself to the fact that the Jewish slaves aren't going to be liberated—at least not by him or in his lifetime. So he buries his dream in the graveyard of broken hearts. But, after forty lost years, God pays an unexpected visit to this 80-year-old shepherd (formally known as *Prince*). His steel is now rusted with age and dulled by desert sand. Why does God come to him now when the skills of the palace and the strength of his youth have long ago dissipated? The answer is in the third principle for those of us on an Exodus to eternity:

**God's strength is made perfect in our weakness.**

Maybe you are experiencing *desert* times. St. John of the Cross called these seasons, "The dark night of the soul." They make the most arrogant

prince feel utterly inadequate. Moses protests in verse eleven, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Listen to the silent scream of his soul: "Please don't make me dig up the dry bones of my failed dreams lest I suffer disappointment again!" NFL coach and Super Bowl winner, Jimmy Johnson says, "Most of us would rather be safe but good, rather than risk everything to be great." Like Moses, we bury our dreams to protect our hearts.

Am I speaking to someone who feels the inadequacy of Moses? Maybe you are feeling old today. Perhaps physical ailments, emotional struggles, or moral failures have sapped your resolve. Or you are on the ragged edge of giving up on your marriage, children, or church. Only you and God know the places where the desert has eroded your soul.

Dear Moses, did you know that stressed-out and shattered steel is infinitely more useful in the hands of God than is the strongest *palace* steel in the hands of a Pharaoh? After he wrestled with his *thorn in the flesh* for fourteen years, St. Paul heard God say, "...my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9). For all of us who need steel in our souls, here are three transforming truths:

### **1. It's not what we are, but who God is.**

When God tells this 80-year-old bundle of insecurities to go down and confront Pharaoh, he responds with two questions in Exodus three:

#### **1) "Who am I?"**

Again, verse eleven: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Wrong question, Moses! It's wrong because the issue is never who *we* are. Moses calculates his chances by focusing on himself. If Moses would have asked himself that question at age forty, he would have answered, "I'm somebody. I'm the Prince of Egypt. I possess everything I need to liberate my people." He had a great *self*-image. He was *self*-confident, *self*-assertive and *self*-motivated. Almost every life coach would tell us that a great *self*-image is the key to success. But for all his *self*-esteem, Moses imploded like a house of cards.

At age 80, Moses answers the question, "Who am I?" far differently. But he's still *self*-focused. Only now he says, "I'm nobody. Just a stuttering old shepherd. If I ever had the right stuff, I don't now!" He now has lousy *self*-esteem. He's *self*-loathing, *self*-condemning, and *self*-deprecating. But *self*-pity is just the other side of the coin of *self*-pride.

We often see people who are down on themselves and blurt out the psycho babble of our narcissistic age: "If only they had a better self-image or more self-esteem." But, that's precisely the problem. Whether people struggle with self-pity or self-pride, the root is the same: *self*.

Expand *self* and you get the word *selfish*. We Christians need to exorcise those words *self-image* and *self-esteem* from our lexicons. Like all of us, that 80-year-old shepherd needs better *God-esteem* or *Christ-esteem*. That's why the second question is so critical:

## 2) "Who are you, God?"

In verse thirteen, Moses says to the Lord, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I say to them?"

The question is never what we are, but who God is. God answers Moses in verse fourteen, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" The Jewish rabbis say that there are 7,000 names for God. But in verse fifteen, God says that *I AM* is his most important name. What a strange name: *I AM*. Let's explore the meaning of it with some top-tier theological thinkers.

If you asked theologian Francis Schaeffer, he would tell you that the name *I AM* is God's way of saying that he *is*, or *exists*. In his book, *The God who is There*, Schaeffer says, "The two fundamental facts of Judeo-Christianity are established in Exodus Three: 1) God *is*, and 2) He is not silent." He comes to Moses and says, "*I AM* and have a word for you to deliver to both the Pharaoh and my people in Egypt."

Sometimes God *is* silent. Exodus 2:23 says, "During that long period ...the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out..." Archeologists have found a short but agonizing prayer written in ancient Hebrew graffiti on the walls of a cave in Egypt: "Help me God!" For forty years this desperate prayer was mocked by heaven's silence.

In his book *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis writes about the silence of God after his wife's death: "You pound on the door of heaven, but all you hear on the other side is silence. You wonder if God cares, or if he even exists anymore." But the fact that God doesn't speak is not proof that he doesn't see or hear. He says to Moses in verse seven, "I have indeed *seen* the misery of my people in Egypt. I have *heard* them crying out because of their slave drivers..." And, the fact that God is silent doesn't mean that he doesn't care. He goes on in verse seven, "...and I am *concerned* about their suffering." When we are going through deep pain, the person who *silently* sits by our side is the most comforting. God's silence is not proof of his blindness, deafness, aloofness, or absence.

We postmodern Americans abhor silence. From the elevator, to our car, to prayer times at church, there is incessant background music. We watch television while listening to our IPOD as we access messages on our Blackberry while twittering on our Cell Phones. Do you ever want to pull the plug and fill your world with soothing silence? Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that *I AM* God." When God is silent, it may be

because he's waiting for us to stop talking. Or he's just waiting quietly for the right time to act. He says to Moses in verse eight, "So I have come down to rescue them from the land of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of the land into a good and spacious land."

Theologian R.C. Sproul adds another take on the name *I AM*. He says that God is saying, "I am who *I am*; not what you *think* me to be, or *imagine* me to be, or *want* me to be, or *wish* me to be, or *make* me over to be." The great *I AM* will not allow us to give him a makeover. Later, at Mt. Sinai, the Israelites will attempt to remake the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God into a little golden bull. How childish! The gods of our creation can never be bigger than our finite imaginations. But our God is the great *I AM*—infinitely bigger than our cosmos, more than sufficient to break our chains and get us to our Promised Land.

A.W. Tozer adds something else about *I AM* in his classic book *The Knowledge of the Holy*. He says that this word for God is a present tense verb in the original Hebrew language. God is saying that he lives in the ever-present *now*. A neverending song before the throne of God declares, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty who *was*, and *is*, and *is to come*." (Revelation 5:8) And Hebrews 13:8 says that he is "...the same *yesterday*, *today*, and *forever*." Tozer says, "He is the God of the past, the present, and the future—all at the same time."

No one describes the great *I AM* better than David in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. He says, "He leads me beside quiet waters." (vs. 2) If he leads, that means he goes ahead of me, and will be where I am going before I get there. In short, he is already in my *future* while I am still in the present. Tomorrow Moses is going to the Egyptian palace to face the most powerful man on planet earth. If he thinks about all the dangers in his future, he can be paralyzed with fear. But the great *I AM* wants Moses to know that he is already in his tomorrow getting things ready.

David goes on in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to say, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." (vs. 4) Eventually Moses' tomorrow will become his today, and the future will *present reality*. He will be standing before Pharaoh. This will be Moses' *valley of the shadow of death*. But God will be standing beside him. He is the great *I AM*—the God who lives in the ever-present now, both in tomorrow and today at the same time.

But the great *I AM*, who is the God of yesterday and tomorrow, is also the Lord of *yesterday*. Like Jesus, we are crucified between two thieves. *Tomorrow* steals today's peace by filling us with dread about things yet to come. *Yesterday* steals from today's joy by reminding us about past failures. But the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm says, "Surely goodness and mercy will *follow* me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (vs. 6). The great *I AM* is also in our past, following behind in our yesterdays, sweeping away messes we've left behind.

So move forward with confidence, Moses. It doesn't matter how weak you are when he is the great *I AM*. Your *I AM* lives even when you don't see or hear him. He is who he declares himself to be, and never changes. He is already in your *tomorrow* conquering what you fear most, walking beside you *today* in the toughest valleys of your life, and following in your *yesterdays* fixing the things you regret most—all at the same time!

## 2. It's not where we are, but where we are going.

A small phrase, tucked away in Exodus 3:1, captures where Moses is when God speaks to him out of the burning bush: "...on the far side of the desert..." Moses is on the *far side* of a bad place, as deep into the desert as you can go. Look at satellite photos of the Sinai and you will see that it is a desolate moonscape. Temperatures skyrocket to 120° in the day and plunge below freezing at night. Like Moses, are you marooned on the "far side" of nowhere today?

All of us would rather be pampered in a palace than dumped in the desert. But the "good life" never builds strong character. That's why Moses had to spend 40 years on the *far side*. **The palace makes a prince, but the desert produces a prophet.** Jacob wrestled with God in the desert. David became a Psalmist in the desert. Elijah found courage in the desert. John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord in the desert. Jesus defeated the devil in the desert. St. Paul met the Resurrected Lord in the desert. St. John received his Revelation on the desert island of Patmos. The road to the Promised Land always goes through the desert.

But, **there are no wasted moments in the desert.** On the desert Moses learned how to be a shepherd so that he could lead 3.6 million cantankerous Jewish sheep across the same wilderness. After 40 years he knew every inch of that desert, how to plot the stars, where to find water, and how to gauge the seasons. Why is that so important? **God never takes you across a wilderness without using you to take others across the same desert.** In the end, it doesn't matter where you've been—even if it was a palace. It doesn't matter where you are—even if it is a desert. It only matter that you are headed for a Promised Land!

## 3. It's not what's on the outside, but who's on the inside.

Moses is not easily convinced. Like all of us, he would rather focus on what he isn't, rather than who the *I AM* is. So God gives three vivid pictures to show that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness:

### 1) An Old Bush Set Afire

In Exodus 3:2 we read, "The angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that, though the bush was on fire, it did not burn up." What is this bush? It's just a dried-up tangle of branches and stickers clinging tenaciously to rock. A good blow

would uproot it and send it bouncing across the desert like a tumbleweed. It is as if God is saying to 80 year-old Moses, "You are that old bush, twisted and gnarled by life. But now I am going to set you afire."

Deuteronomy 4:24 says, "For your God is a consuming fire." John the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize us with fire. The Book of Acts tells us that when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, "tongues of fire" appeared above their heads. When Exodus 3:2 says that the bush is on fire, it is saying that the Holy Spirit is in that bush. Exodus tells us that "the Angel of the Lord" is in the flames. Whenever the Angel of the Lord appears in the Old Testament he is the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit fills us with the very presence and power of Christ. God is saying to Moses, "You may be a dried-up old bush, but I am going to set you afire with the Holy Spirit and fill you with the 'Angel of the Lord.' The glory of Christ will be exalted in your 80 year-old gnarled and twisted body."

Some of us are afraid of being set on fire by the Holy Spirit. We want our religion decent and in order. We fear that fiery faith will get out of control. Like Moses, we need to go a little closer to that fire and see it for ourselves. We will discover that the fire of the Holy Spirit doesn't get out of control or burn the bush up. But it does set our withered bodies on fire with the presence, power, and passion of our Lord.

## **2) A Crooked Stick turned into a Dangerous Snake**

In Exodus 4:1 Moses rattles off another excuse: "What if they don't believe me or listen to me..." So the Lord replies in verse two, "What is that in your hand?" Moses answers, "A staff." Literally, the word is stick. Somewhere in his desert wanderings, Moses found this crooked and weather-beaten old stick. It was useful to lean on when he was tired, to prod his sheep, and as a weapon to drive away predators. I believe that God is saying to Moses, "You are like this crooked, old stick. You weren't much when I found you lying on the desert. But I decided to pick you up and use you. You're now my stick. I'm going to lean on you, and use you to prod my sheep all the way to the Promised Land, and to fight off the predators who try to harm them."

But it's hard to convince a crooked stick that it can be useful in God's hands. So he commands Moses in verse three, "Throw the stick on the ground." It turns into a snake. It must be a dangerous one because Moses runs from it. God is showing Moses that when the Holy Spirit invades a stick, it becomes powerfully deadly. God doesn't want us to be nice, safe religious folk. He is looking for dangerous Christians who will shake up the world. But we are afraid of such Holy Spirit power. So God commands Moses in verse four, "Reach out your hand and take hold of it by the tail." Anyone who has ever handled snakes will tell you that the most dangerous place to grab a snake is by its tail, because it will spin around and bite you. This is God's way of saying to Moses, "You

can handle Holy Spirit power. Don't run from it." Later this stick will become very dangerous. As it is held up, rivers will run with blood, plagues will invade the land, and the Red Sea will come crashing down with deadly destruction on the Pharaoh's grand army.

The magicians at Pharaoh's court also had sticks. They were slick sticks, lathed straight, made of mahogany and oak, and adorned with silver and gold. They turn their slick sticks into snakes by a magician's slight of hand. Moses' old stick didn't look very impressive up against those slick sticks. But, when his snake slithered across the palace floor, it ate up all the other snakes. There are lots of slick sticks in this world: attractive people, even slick stick churches, using all the latest tricks and gadgets. But God still prefers the crooked old sticks crafted in the desert to the slick sticks of the palace. Filled with Jesus Christ, they become a dangerous force.

### **3) A Shaking Hand filled with life and death**

Moses is still unconvinced. It's so hard to take our focus off our own weakness and trust in the strength of the great *I AM*. So in Exodus 4:6 God tells 80-year-old Moses to focus on his hand. My father was a big fisherman with massive hands. When I was a teenager, we would arm wrestle. I couldn't budge those muscular arms that hauled in nets full of king salmon. I'll never forget that day when he was 83 years old. We were eating hamburgers at a fast food place, and he was trying to open one of those cellophane ketchup packets. But he wasn't strong enough. I looked at his shaking hands, lined with blue veins and splotted with age spots. As I took the packet and tore it open for him, I remembered the days when we arm-wrestled. I wanted to cry. I wonder if Moses' hands were withered like my father's.

I can almost hear Moses say, "My hands are too weak for the job." So God says in verse six, "Put your hand in your cloak." The hand becomes leprous. It must be as frightening as a fire in a bush or snake in a stick. He puts it back into his cloak and it comes out restored, as soft as a newborn baby's bottom. God is giving a third picture: when his Holy Spirit possesses a hand it has both the power of life and death; leprosy and birth; healing and plague; blessings and curses. All those things and more will take place when Moses stretches forth his hands.

What is the value of a man or woman? It all depends in whose hand that person rests and for what purpose he or she is being used. In God's hand, even the weakest people are strong. It doesn't matter who we are. But everything hinges on who God is. It doesn't matter where we are, but where we are going. It doesn't even matter what's on the outside as long as Jesus is on the inside. When that happens old bushes catch fire; crooked sticks become snakes; and shaking hands change the world.